

Voice in the Village: Indigenous Peoples Contest Globalization in Bolivia

ALISON BRYSK

Professor

University of California, Santa Barbara

NATASHA BENNETT

PhD Candidate

University of California, Santa Barbara

THE CLOSE OF THE TWENTIETH century saw the unexpected rise of an indigenous peoples' rights movement in Latin America and worldwide, contesting 500 years of oppression and the emerging challenges of globalization. By the turn of the millennium, indigenous rights campaigns had gained a voice in local, national, and international political arenas. Yet the legacies of oppression and the pressures of globalization continue, and inclusion has translated only partially into empowerment. Now we must ask when and how indigenous peoples gain influence over the development processes that threaten their lands, cultures, and livelihoods.

Bolivia provides a good case study in indigenous empowerment, since it is an indigenous majority country whose marginalized population has been struggling for rights in waves since the 1952 Revolution. In the 1990s, Bolivia's indigenous peoples made vast strides in legal recognition, political representation, and local autonomy, and began to contest globalization projects such as internationally sponsored dams and roads. But recently, development crises, internal political divisions, and lack of leverage in key transnational venues have limited the gains achieved by indigenous communities throughout the continent. Thus, the outcome of current indigenous struggles in Bolivia can

ALISON BRYSK is the Mellichamp Professor of Global Governance in the Global and International Studies Program at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She has authored or edited eight books on international human rights, most recently *From Human Trafficking to Human Rights: Reframing Contemporary Slavery* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). NATASHA BENNETT is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science, UCSB.

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ALISON BRYSK AND NATASHA BENNETT

help us to assess the prospects, potential, and limitations of the critical move from inclusion to empowerment in the era of twenty-first century globalization. After examining an overview of trends in indigenous rights struggles, we will focus on the Bolivian experience.

FROM TRIBAL VILLAGE TO GLOBAL VILLAGE: THE BIG PICTURE

After centuries of chronic marginalization, indigenous peoples found their voice in the era of globalization. The key to their mobilization was the transnational formation of a pan-indigenous identity, coalitions with global civil society, and a series of appeals to international institutions and grassroots supporters above and below the blocked state institutions. As Latin America democratized in the second half of the twentieth century, some governments became receptive to contestation. But the 1990s were also the peak of neoliberalism, in which globalization was a double-edged sword for indigenous peoples. At the same time that globalization challenged indigenous livelihoods and cultures, it also provided new tools for political mobilization and self-defense.

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The threats and challenges of globalization included the expansion of state power, economic development, and cultural domination. Throughout the Amazon Basin, in Colombia, and in the Sandinista conflict with Nicaragua's Miskitos ethnic group, indigenous peoples have been displaced and persecuted by the militarization of national borders and manipulation by rebel groups. In some areas, this security crisis overlaps with cultural nation building that seeks forced assimilation through the suppression of native languages, religions, and family life.

In Latin America, North America, and Asia alike, tribal groups are threatened by several dynamics of economic development: construction of infrastructure such as dams and roads by international agencies, resource extraction by transnational corporations, loss of collective lands to privatization, and incursions by impoverished neighbors displaced by national development and globalization. In the latter scenario, tribal peoples are often vulnerable to physical abuse by police, military, and paramilitary forces enforcing national development plans, protecting transnational projects, or simply executing the orders of local elites. Mexico's Zapatista uprising reflects this pattern acutely: it was mounted on the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect in 1994 in response to the associated privatization of historical collective land rights for tribal communities.

VOICE IN THE VILLAGE

In response to these challenges, indigenous peoples have mobilized for their rights and achieved an unexpected impact, especially in Latin America. Following protests, indigenous groups have been granted significant land rights in Ecuador and Brazil, water rights in Bolivia, and zones of local autonomy in parts of Mexico, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. Constitutions have been changed to reflect multicultural national identities and to grant indigenous peoples the right to participate in government in several countries, notably in Bolivia and Brazil. Accordingly, bilingual education programs, health policies, and local development schemes have been enhanced in Mexico, Costa Rica, and most Andean countries. Tribal groups have been granted special political participation rights in Colombia's legislature, and indigenous leaders have come to national political power in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru. Numerous Latin American governments have given tribal communities improved standing to approve international development and forestry projects, in part due to the increased accountability to indigenous stakeholders required by the World Bank as well as the regional Inter-American Development Bank. Although the social conditions of indigenous people in Latin America remain poor and unequal to the dominant population, they have made tremendous gains in access to power to contest those conditions.

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But at the same time, globalization has also deepened the contradictions of the neoliberal multicultural state. While some indigenous peoples remain second-class citizens, others have moved up to first-class status in second-class states—states that are at the mercy of global forces and cannot fully protect any of their citizens. As a local indigenous leader in a Mexican autonomous zone told me, “We don't want self-determination in order to administer impoverishment.”¹

FROM INCLUSION TO EMPOWERMENT?

Recent indigenous political action in Latin America has sustained recognition and political access that is used to contest development projects. However, indigenous voices meet with mixed reactions from populist governments pledged to represent rising indigenous populations but pressured by development crises. Indigenous ties to land and environment create further conundrums. We will examine the regional trend, and then turn to how this dynamic has played out in Bolivia.

During the past year, Latin American governments have expanded the

political and cultural recognition and rights of indigenous peoples throughout the region. In Colombia, indigenous languages may now be used for official purposes, and the government will provide translation for access to justice. In Brazil, the government ministry for Indian affairs has set up a new agency for indigenous women and a gender action plan to address discrimination. In Chile, outgoing President Michelle Bachelet acknowledged and apologized for Chile's historical mistreatment of indigenous peoples.²

But indigenous land rights present a more complicated picture and begin to touch on development conflicts. While the populist Chavez regime in Venezuela redistributed about 15,000 hectares of land to Yukpa Indians in 2011,

Indigenous movements have mobilized to protest environmentally destructive globalization and development projects. debates still rage over whether certain local development projects will be cancelled as a result.³ Chilean Mapuche

have been fighting since the conclusion of the Pinochet regime for ancestral lands seized under the dictatorship and against the application of anti-terror laws to criminalize land occupations. In 2010, 34 indigenous detainees staged a 66-day hunger strike against the controversial anti-terror law.⁴ As a result, the president proposed legislation that would forbid civilians and minors from being tried in military courts and announced a \$4 billion package of economic and social measures to improve socioeconomic opportunities and quality of life for Mapuche in their home territory.⁵

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Elsewhere, indigenous movements have mobilized to protest environmentally destructive globalization and development projects, the most complicated scenario of all. Since 2009, Peruvian Indian organizations have staged roadblocks to protest free trade agreements, deforestation, and the privatization of lands, leading to violent clashes with police.⁶ In Brazil, the same government that easily expanded indigenous anti-discrimination programs is at the same time pushing through a controversial dam project that activists claim would flood Indian lands (despite an unresolved case contesting this move at the Inter-American Human Rights Commission). Hundreds of indigenous protestors have occupied the site of Belo Monte dam construction. The Brazilian government defends Belo Monte as necessary to ensure that the country has sufficient electricity and denies that indigenous lands will be flooded.⁷ Under Ecuador's sympathetic populist government, which includes an indigenous government agency and indigenous political parties that have seats in Congress, destructive oil production and mining continue in indigenous lands, and have been met by massive protest. According to The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities

of Ecuador (CONAIE), there are currently 189 people accused of sabotage and terrorism by the Ecuadorian government for exercising their right to protest the privatization of natural resources. Amnesty International issued a statement denouncing their imprisonment as an attempt to silence opposition to government policies.⁸ CONAIE actively mobilized support for a community referendum to prevent mining in the Amazon, but the government has attempted to deem the referendum illegal.

THE RISE OF THE INDIGENOUS VOICE IN BOLIVIA

The year 2005 saw a historic moment for Bolivia's indigenous majority with the overwhelming electoral victory of Latin America's first indigenous president, Evo Morales. At a ceremonial inauguration held at the holy pre-Incan site of Tiwanaku, Morales announced that his election began a "new year for the original peoples of the world, in which we seek equality and justice."⁹ Indeed, Morales's presidential election marks the culmination of a series of social movements, which, since 1952, have sought to reverse the privatization of national resources, combat U.S. foreign policy concerning coca production, and claim rights for indigenous peoples.

The story begins with one of the few true social revolutions in Latin America. In the 1952 Bolivian revolution, organized miner unions and peasant coalitions overthrew Bolivia's oppressive and politically unstable oligarchy. The National Revolutionary Movement (MNR) pursued class-based initiatives that challenged political party elites and represented the interests of organized labor.¹⁰ While the MNR government made important political strides for Bolivia's working class, including the implementation of universal suffrage and an extensive redistributive agrarian reform, it also folded cultural rights and questions of ethnic identity into broader class-based initiatives.¹¹ It was not until the late 1960s that social movements took up indigenous concerns. The Katarista movement of the 1970s was mostly comprised of urban Aymara intellectuals attempting to reformulate Bolivia's historical narratives and mainstream "Indianness" as a political identity. The movement initially proposed that a plurinational Bolivian state (a state that officially and socially legitimates its diverse social groups) would allow indigenous populations to effectively claim citizenship rights.¹² The 1990s brought an interesting array of multicultural policies to the political scene. The 1993 Law of Constitutional Reform recognized indigenous rights.¹³ One year later, the 1994 Law of Popular Participation decentralized political processes, granting regional and municipal governments more political autonomy. Yet,

while the law was designed to provide opportunities for indigenous representation and governance, many have argued that the law granted greater weight to local elites, decentralizing social exclusion.¹⁴

Meanwhile, as Bolivia returned to civilian rule after a series of military dictatorships, the state embraced the neoliberal era, quickly adopting United States–prescribed structural adjustment policies intended to decentralize state power and privatize national resources. Bolivia is well known for its 2000 Water War, in which citizens of Cochabamba successfully reversed neoliberal water privatization efforts that followed the World Bank’s loan provisions. Throughout the early 2000s, parallel peasant demonstrations erupted among indigenous groups in Bolivia’s highlands and in Cochabamba’s valley. Indigenous demonstrators made appeals for national control over water, natural resources, biodiversity, land reform, and labor rights.¹⁵ The coca-grower’s union, headed by Evo Morales, also used claims to culture to protect the culturally recognized sanctity of the coca leaf—and employment associated with coca growing—in response to the U.S. coca eradication efforts. In what became known as the Gas Wars in 2003 and 2005, a similar wave of protests against the privatization of the country’s hydrocarbon reserves first ousted former dictator (and democratically elected president) Goni Sánchez de Lozada in 2003 and then his successor, Carlos Mesa, in 2005.

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In the historic election that followed, Evo Morales was popularly elected to the presidency and immediately responded to demands for a new constitution that more accurately represented the country’s indigenous majority. The constitution of the new Plurinational State of Bolivia delineates a comprehensive set of rights, based on expanded notions of human rights and cultural citizenship. In effect, national law uses human rights and indigenous values as foundations for a new breed of inclusive political representation. Among other policies, the constitution legally recognizes all indigenous languages as official state languages, and includes provisions for indigenous autonomy in rural areas.

“WE ARE ALL TIPNIS:” BROADENING INDIGENOUS RIGHTS IN TERMS OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

As elsewhere in Latin America, development dilemmas and environmental debates have tested Bolivia’s new democratic government’s commitment to indigenous rights. In Bolivia, the social movements that put Evo Morales and his MAS (Movement Toward Socialism) government into power have assumed a new political role, holding Morales accountable for his promises. Within the

last year, these social movements have formed against two major policies.

The first wave of indigenous rights protests is reminiscent of the Gas Wars of the early 2000s. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets in December 2010, setting up roadblocks to protest the government's decision to repeal subsidies of the country's nationalized hydrocarbons. The government defended its position that the repeal of subsidies was necessary to protect the economy and to redirect social spending. Ultimately, this series of protests forced the government to reinstitute the subsidies, attesting to the continued strength of Bolivia's social movements that relentlessly seek governmental accountability.

The second mass protest, in which indigenous marchers contested a highway development project, speaks more directly to the difficulties indigenous peoples have experienced in the face of economic development as their ways of life

For the indigenous populations, the TIPNIS park represents more than simple irreplaceable biodiversity; it also carries divine importance as part of Mother Earth.

clash with industrialization agendas. Economic policy under the Morales administration, largely spearheaded by Vice President García Linera, emphasizes the development of the country's domestic markets, internal production, and industrialization through policies such as the nationalization of Bolivia's hydrocarbons and infrastructure projects. The Morales administration has argued that a road traversing the Bolivian tropics would provide a necessary avenue for the transportation of goods and services through the country. In early 2011, the Bolivian ministry approved negotiations for loans from the Brazilian government, propelling a project to connect the region of Beni to Cochabamba through the protected Isiboro Sécure Indigenous Territory and National Park (TIPNIS). Indigenous populations who live and depend on the TIPNIS park protested that the project would be destructive to the environment and that it threatened indigenous autonomy. In response, they coordinated a march to the capitol city with the hopes of halting the project.

The TIPNIS indigenous territory and national park is home to some of the world's most concentrated biodiversity. Aside from its extensive variety of plants and animals, it also includes different ecosystems that range from rain forests and swamps to dry plains. Anthropologists and ecologists argued that the construction of the highway would have serious environmental consequences that would harm biodiversity, and that it would affect the aquifers that currently provide an important source of drinking water.¹⁶ However, for the indigenous populations, the TIPNIS park represents more than simply irreplaceable biodi-

versity; it also carries divine importance as part of Mother Earth. Socially, the TIPNIS area is home to lowland indigenous groups who have maintained a direct pre-colonial heritage and claim ancestral rights to the land. These Amazonian indigenous populations sustain a livelihood that is deeply committed to striking a balance with nature. They understand their life in terms of reciprocal exchanges with Mother Nature and govern their own institutions and customs within a self-identified collective.

The TIPNIS march represents the eighth indigenous march to the capital in defense of “indigenous dignity, life, and land.”¹⁷ The 1990 March for Territory and for Dignity sought to establish indigenous autonomy and territory, and marked the emergence of an indigenous mobilization for Bolivia’s lowland Amazonian communities.¹⁸ In a symbolic fashion, the march married ecological concerns to indigenous identity and resulted in a relatively successful protection of indigenous land grants.¹⁹ In the 2011 TIPNIS march, approximately 1,000 indigenous people from the lowlands took part in a two-month, 250-mile trek to the presidential palace in La Paz. Their primary objective was simple: to speak directly to President Morales and demand that he prevent the construction of the proposed highway. By the end of the march, they had broadened their demands and support base.

8 The 2011 march began in mid-August among TIPNIS residents. By the end of the month, they had attracted a wide range of popular support from the country’s larger Aymara and Quechua indigenous groups. Support from

For the marchers and their supporters, protecting TIPNIS became not only a matter of ecological protection, but also a case for indigenous rights. the Bolivian Confederation of Indigenous Peoples, a coalition of indigenous groups and the main indigenous representative body, managed the marchers’ negotiation efforts and helped

the movement articulate 16 demands. Most notably, these included a comprehensive framework for the protection of the TIPNIS and other national parks; effective respect for indigenous autonomy; recognition of the indigenous right to be consulted in development projects; appeals for public education, housing, and health services; and even implementation and financing for an independent indigenous television station. While the TIPNIS march had one major and clear objective—blocking the construction of the highway—the movement encompassed an array of provisions that sought to broaden indigenous rights more generally.

However, unlike previous marches, the 2011 TIPNIS march met some

local resistance and violent police repression. Colonists, a term for indigenous migrants and small agricultural producers who have illegally settled in the TIPNIS area to grow coca, successfully sustained roadblocks that impeded the marchers' progress for over a week. There were suspicions that a violent conflict would erupt once the TIPNIS marchers reached the colonists' blockade.²⁰ To avoid violence, local police intervened, providing a buffer between the marchers and colonists. In response, the TIPNIS demanded that Bolivian Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca accompany them through the police line, which he did.²¹ However, the next day local police descended on the indigenous protestors' campsites with tear gas and truncheons, detaining hundreds. Following the incident, the national government released a statement declaring that it did not order the police to disrupt the march. Shortly after the government's statement, Defense Minister Cecilia Chacon issued a statement of her own to accompany her resignation, in which she condemned the government's actions. The next day, Interior Minister Sacha Lorenti also resigned following a press conference in which he claimed that the police were deployed to buffer potential conflicts between TIPNIS marchers and the colonists.²² In a brief video interview, the president of the Confederation for Indigenous Women in Bolivia highlighted the anger of indigenous populations at the government violence: "It is a criminal act what the president of this plurinational state has done to us [...] I not only call upon Bolivia, but upon all of Latin America and the World because the TIPNIS is the jungle's lung that breathes for Bolivia, Latin America, and the world."

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Once the marchers successfully completed their journey and arrived in La Paz, Evo Morales finally signed a law that banned the construction of the highway through any portion of the TIPNIS area. Titled the *Ley Corta*, it officially classifies the TIPNIS park as "untouchable" for development projects, seemingly meeting the indigenous protestors' demands. However, debates over the specific meaning of the term "untouchable" continue to stall the law's implementation, and there has been no serious discussion regarding the movement's other demands.

The symbolic nature of indigenous claims carried appeals to transnational communities and national identity similar to previous marches, yet revealed much deeper political frustrations with the national government. The march's slogan, "We are all TIPNIS," denotes a symbolic commitment that equates rights of nature with human rights, more generally. For the marchers and their supporters, protecting the TIPNIS became not only a matter of ecological protection, but also a case for indigenous rights. Furthermore, it carried strong messages regarding the universal right to life, the nature of national identity,

and was regarded as an indispensable fundamental exercise of political and civil rights. Ultimately, the TIPNIS march highlights the continued nature of fragile social and political relations even in light of national legal reform.

DEEPENING CONTRADICTIONS

While Morales's opposition claimed that the president's defense of the road project connecting Beni to Cochabamba (the country's major coca producing region) signaled a commitment to cocaine interests, those sympathetic to the TIPNIS march defended the protestors by pointing to inherent contradictions in the Morales administration's environmental and social policies. Scholars of Bolivia have noted that Morales's MAS government juggles different political aims. Bolivian political scientist Roberto Laserna suggests that there are three tendencies present in the reform of the Bolivian state.²³ The first is an "indigenist" tendency designed to incorporate indigenous political actors and fulfill the collective rights of indigenous peoples. The second refers to what he calls a socialist tendency that places an emphasis on the broader role of the state in nationalist development and infrastructure projects. The third, popular democracy, refers to a breed of government that Morales calls "a government of social movements."²⁴ The TIPNIS conflict provides an example of how these three tendencies collide, presenting a dilemma for consistent and responsible social and economic reform.

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The most notable contradiction is the government's emphasis on environmental protection. Recently, Bolivia has assumed an active role in global environmental politics. In 2010, Bolivia hosted the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, a conference attended by environmental justice and indigenous rights groups from approximately 150 countries. Following the discussions of the conference, Bolivia passed a piece of radical conservation legislation that officially grants nature the same and equal rights to humans. The Law of Mother Earth regards humans as equal entities within a natural world.²⁵ However, much like the controversy concerning the "untouchability" of the TIPNIS park, the law is not expected to halt all industrial development as many hoped, but rather introduces confusing questions about the practical and legal implications of such ecological conservation efforts.

In the weeks following Morales's signing of the law banning development in the TIPNIS, the Consejo Indígena del Sur (Indigenous Council of the South, CONISUR), alongside coca growers and residents of Cochabamba, organized a countermarch to La Paz defending the highway project and seeking to reverse

the Ley Corta and propel the highway construction plan back into action. The responses to this countermarch have been wide ranging: Vice President Álvaro García Linera has proposed that the issue be decided through a referendum of TIPNIS residents; Evo Morales maintains the position that the road is fundamentally necessary for the country's development, yet has publicly announced that the responsibility falls upon the Bolivian Confederation of Indigenous Peoples to discuss the issue with CONISUR and the other pro-highway marchers to reach an agreement; and government lawmakers have reopened the TIPNIS highway project debate, threatening the highway ban altogether.²⁶

Motivated by fears that the law will be repealed as a result of this debate, indigenous actors have taken their struggle from the streets to the legislative assembly. In order to ensure that the highway ban stays in place, indigenous leaders in the legislative assembly have formed the first indigenous caucus, effectively blocking the MAS party's efficiency and ultimately threatening the MAS majority in the lower house.²⁷ The long-term consequences of this caucus formation are unknown, but for now it clearly illustrates what the vice president has admittedly called fractured "government-indigenous relations."²⁸

The Morales administration finds itself caught up in a whirlwind of seemingly contradictory initiatives symptomatic of twenty-first century indigenous rights struggles in Latin America. It attempts to: (a) solidify social inclusion while respecting indigenous autonomy; (b) conserve Mother Earth while making strides to foster economic development; and (c) navigate between competing national and transnational business interests while complying with constituent demands. Indigenous proclamations that Morales has failed to live up to his promises of protecting indigenous rights and environmental justice speak to these tensions and contradictions in a politically sensitive manner that is reminiscent of historical social exclusion.

CONCLUSION

Limitations surrounding political action for rural indigenous populations in Bolivia and elsewhere cannot be reduced to tensions between economic development on the one hand, and indigenous livelihoods, on the other. A long history of racialized politics at the national level and deeply embedded racism and discriminatory politics within civil society has set up a series of barriers that the law seemingly cannot overcome. Yet, as a reward for their organizational efforts and successful contestations of threatening policies during the last few decades, indigenous populations have now been given the political tools, language, and

legitimacy to continue those struggles in a rather successful manner.

As this deeper examination of Bolivia's social movements has shown us, indigenous peoples in Latin America are redefining their status as global actors. Yet, even in the plurinational states of Ecuador and Bolivia, in which the government legally recognizes the civil and social rights of their indigenous populations, indigenous people have needed to actively remind the state of their status as citizens. In states where legal and social status is less clear, indigenous people cannot make strong claims to national citizenship. Thus, indigenous populations in these conditions are forced to overcome greater legal, political, and societal barriers to gain visibility as political actors. Regardless of legal status, indigenous peoples continue to face violent repression, criminalization, and marginalization for defending a particular way of life and an equal right to substantive inclusion in political decision making. Indigenous populations have taken the step from second- to first-class citizens, but in an era of globalization and fragile social relations it is important to ask whether this multicultural citizenship is enough to sustain indigenous inclusion and empowerment.

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